

OPEN LETTERS.

BOTANICAL WORK OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

To the Editors of the Botanical Gazette:—In the editorial pages of a recent number of the GAZETTE, attention is called to the botanical investigations of the Department of Agriculture, the statement being made that under the present arrangement there is a dissipation of energy and a duplication of work, which would be overcome by combining the divisions of botany, forestry, agrostology, and vegetable physiology and pathology. I feel sure the writer of the article in question is not fully conversant with all the facts in the case, else he would see that such a plan as proposed would be a most decided step backward.

Strictly speaking, the work of the divisions mentioned is for the most part botanical. They all deal with plants, and botany is the science of plants, both wild and cultivated. If we accept this definition we might include the branches of the department engaged in horticultural work, for horticulture has for its very foundation botany pure and simple. These branches, however, may be omitted from the discussion, and on the ground that botany is the science of plants, the four divisions mentioned, representing the scientific study of plant culture in the department may logically be included in one group, call it bureau, division, or any other name. While this would be a logical arrangement according to the definition of the term botany, the same would hold true for a grouping of the bureau of animal industry, the division of entomology, and the division of the biological survey (ornithology and mammalogy), on the ground that their work is zoological. Botany, in other words, is as broad a field as zoology, and the various branches are as distinct in one case as in the other. The men engaged in the forestry work, for example, are authorities in their line and are recognized everywhere as such by both scientific and practical men. They are not supposed to know any more about vegetable pathology than they do about entomology, chemistry, or any of the kindred sciences. Vegetable pathology, on the other hand, as a science has nothing more in common with forestry than it has with agriculture or horticulture, using these terms in their broadest sense.

Every botanist in the country is aware that the division of botany proper does not cover the whole field of botany, and doubtless, as the editor says, it should be rechristened, to indicate more definitely the scope of its work. In the past this has largely been a systematic study of our flora, and as a result

one of the largest and most valuable collections of plants in the world has been built up. The Smithsonian Institution has recently assumed charge of this collection, for which it has always been responsible, and thus relieved of this part of the work, the division of botany, of the Department of Agriculture, can continue its important economic investigations on weeds, pure seed, the geographic distribution of plants and their relation to environment, etc., all of which are distinct from those being pursued by other branches of the department.

Omitting further argument, the chief reasons for maintaining the present autonomy of the divisions may be summarized as follows:

(1) The work of each division is distinct and well defined, having been the result of gradual growth and in accordance with the natural development of the department as a whole.

(2) There is no duplication of work, not even in office or routine matters. The division of vegetable physiology and pathology may receive and answer 5,000 letters a year, all of which relate wholly to its work and involve a certain amount of labor, which could in no wise be saved by a concentration of effort. The same is true of its bibliographical work and such necessary labor that must be given to the collection of fungi, representing the economic phase of the division's investigations.

(3) The chief incentive which keeps good men in the department is that they have freedom in their investigation. The men in charge know the details of their own lines of work perhaps better than any one that could be put over them. They are in direct touch with the people for whose benefit the investigations are made, and it is only since this has been brought about that the work of the department in the main has come to be looked upon as a credit to the country. The moment the autonomy of the divisions is destroyed, which would certainly be the case if the plan proposed were carried out, the principal incentive for good work will be at an end.

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LOCAL FLORAS.

To the Editors of the Botanical Gazette:—I am interested in what you say editorially in regard to the scope of local floras. I agree very heartily with the proposition that a local flora should be more than a mere list and should not be confined by artificial bounds. Everyone who has worked faithfully on a local flora has felt this trouble. Much more could be printed in our floras were it not for expense of publication. I see no excuse whatever for the publication of lists that say nothing about the plants themselves and the problems of their distribution, and yet devote hundreds of dollars to